

## **You Might Be Right - Polarization Research - Transcript**

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** What we've seen in other countries is that when we allow polarization to get really serious, people start giving their own side a pass on democratic norms. They say, "I'm so afraid of the other side. It's okay if my side breaks a few rules because we have to keep that side out." That's really dangerous, so it matters, and there are things we can do.

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with funding support from members of our Producers Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit [youmightberight.org](http://youmightberight.org).

Are Americans as divided as we think we are? The research on political polarization shows significant and growing levels of affective polarization, an emotional dislike for the other party, but less ideological division among voters than many people perceive. And while Americans may agree on more policy than we realize, the members of Congress we elect from both parties have almost no areas of issue agreement.

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam are joined by Rachel Kleinfeld, an international relations scholar and senior fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

**Phil Bredesen:** Well, Bill, another season.

**Bill Haslam:** I'm amazed they haven't canceled us yet.

**Phil Bredesen:** Don't say that.

**Bill Haslam:** That's right.

**Phil Bredesen:** Someone might hear it.

**Bill Haslam:** But this is timely. We're going to be talking about polarization that I don't think anybody would deny, and we're looking down the reality of a presidential election that I'm pretty confident will be contentious at the very best.

**Phil Bredesen:** Well, I think we've got a lot of good things on the agenda. I think today's going to be great. Start this off, and looking forward to it.

**Bill Haslam:** I think one of the things that I think that have made you and I enjoy working together is we both like to start with, "Well, what's the data tell us? What are the facts around this?" And our first guest who we're getting ready to hear really has a focus on what does the research tell us about polarization. So I'm actually really looking forward to hearing what she has to say.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Likewise.

**Bill Haslam:** Phil, our guest today is Rachel Kleinfeld. She's an international relations scholar serving as senior fellow at the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She has an incredible resume all around this idea of supporting and protecting democracy. She's a trustee of the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, and States United for Democracy, and on the advisory board of Protect Democracy. So I'm noting a little theme here.

She briefed the governments of the United States and some allied democracies on issues of conflict in the rule of law. She's on the UN's sector security reform advisory group. Anyway, I won't go into all of her resume except to say that she's up to her elbows deep in issues around democracy. And the reason that I'm excited about her is she's doing what we want to start as we talk about polarization, what does the data tell us? What's the research showing?

So Rachel, thank you for joining us, and we're really thrilled and looking forward to the conversation.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** A real pleasure to be here.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Rachel, I'm going to just start out really with the question that I think Bill started on there. I mean, I believe that we've become very polarized, but the world I live in is not necessarily a random sampling of views out there in the world. You've looked into this in detail, and what does the data really tell us about the true extent of that polarization and kind of what it looks like when you get under the hood a bit?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** So you're right that you don't live in a randomly sampled world. The political world's real different than most Americans are. So let me give you three answers to that question. First, we are very affectively polarized. That means emotionally polarized. Partisans really don't like each other. They don't want their kids to marry other partisans, they don't want to spend time with each other, and so on. The good news is we're much less ideologically polarized than we think. So we don't like each other, but we actually agree on much, much more than we think.

So what's causing that disconnect? Well, that's where the third answer comes in. We've been electing politicians who are much, much more ideologically polarized than most Americans. And so when somebody thinks, what does a Democrat look like or what does a Republican look like? They think of J.D. Vance or AOC and they attribute those beliefs to their neighbors. And those

are not their neighbors' beliefs. Their neighbors are much more in a kind of common sense, messy middle, whereas our political leaders are quite far apart, and that's causing regular Americans to misunderstand where most other Americans are.

**Bill Haslam:** And Rachel, let me jump in and ask you a question. Are the people we're electing more ideologically polarized or rhetorically polarized? One of the things I always heard when I was in office with folks was like, "Well, I agree with what you're saying. I just wish you said it with more passion and more of an awareness that the other side are the bad guys." So I mean, are we more ideologically, or is it just that the rhetorically loud are kind of getting the attention and winning races?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** For politicians, it's actually both. So ideologically there used to be a great deal of overlap. You had your Southern Democrats who were pretty conservative on an awful lot of issues, and you had Republicans who were what used to be called Country Club Republicans, and they were fiscally conservative, but they had a lot of social views. Nixon now would not be a part of the Republican Party ideologically on many, many issues because he was too progressive. So you had just a whole lot of overlap.

And what you can see when you ask politicians about policy issues over time is that overlap has disappeared. There's now no overlap between politicians in Congress at least, and you're seeing a lot of people who had those mixed beliefs not win their primaries or not want to try to win their primaries and drop out.

**Phil Bredezen:** So certainly in my adult lifetime, this is the most polarized by far that politics have ever been. So the question's really what's going on in the larger world, in the larger society that you feel is driving this, if you agree with that?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Sure. So when you look at polarization, it is very, very high. I can't say it's the largest it's ever been because we don't have polling back to say the Civil War when I presume it was pretty darn bad as well. But what's driving it really is a political system that's taking differences between Americans, which are real, people have real differences, and hypercharging them.

So some political systems dampen affective polarization and ideological polarization, like after Northern Ireland got out of its troubles. For decades, Northern Irish were fighting with one another in a guerrilla war. And when they had the peace process and George Mitchell helped end that war, they changed their voting system to what's called proportional representation. So if you're 30% of the voting public likes your beliefs, you might win 30% of your parliament, but you don't necessarily win the whole shebang by getting one more vote than 50% like in America.

What we found is that this one more vote than 50% really hypercharges polarization, so does having just two parties rather than a lot of parties, as you might imagine. If it's us and them, two parties are given to that, whereas a lot of parties are less so. And then our party primary

system, which lets the most partisan voters, usually 3, 4, 5, 6% of your voters determine the outcome in a place where people are pretty sorted, so the primaries often determine the final. Those three things in our voting system are hypercharging polarization for us, and the opposite in other countries is dampening their polarization.

**Bill Haslam:** So you call affective with an A polarization—

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** You can just call it emotional. It just means we don't like each other.

**Bill Haslam:** Okay, and I'm going to interpret that as not only is the other side wrong, but their wrong for bad motives. They're not even trying to get to the best answer. And I guess I've heard it called motivation asymmetry. There's different ways to measure that. I mean, maybe I'm asking you the same thing I asked you before, but why has it gone up so much? Why does so many Americans feel like violence against the other side is okay because of the circumstances we're in?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Well, it starts with fear, right? When you have so little policy overlap between your politicians, you're imagining two very different worlds if the different politicians win. If you have a lot of policy overlap at the political level, then you want your guy to win, but if the other person wins, you'll try again next time. But if you're afraid that the other person winning means your business is going to close down during a pandemic, or it means you're not going to get to raise your kids the way you believe is right, or it means you won't get to control your body – very deep feelings – well, then you really worry about the other side winning. So that fear is a strong motivation.

Then what you have is these politicians who are hypercharging that fear. So instead of a political incentive structure that says, "What I really need to do is pivot to my left or my right during the primary and then attract a general voter in the middle," which used to be how politics worked. You'd go to one side for the primary, you'd come back to the middle and you try to appeal to everyone. Now people are so polarized, the incentive system is – and seats are so safe for one party. 85% of congressional seats, one party is going to win them pretty much.

So what that means is you go to your base and then you double down, you double down, you double down. That incentive structure means that the politicians take that bit of fear and play it up and play it up. So you can see affective polarization grow during campaign seasons as each side tries to scare the dickens out of the other to get their votes in, and they don't have an incentive to come back to the middle and appeal to the middle voter.

**Phil Bredezen:** Rachel, I'm curious, you've made yourself a major name as being sort of data-centric of really kind of applying a scientific approach to this issue of polarization. How do you do that? What is it you do in the way of research that leads you to these conclusions? Where does the data come from?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** So I do a lot of reading. I'm a comparative democracy scholar. My Ph.D. is in international relations from Oxford, but my primary focus has always been the rule of law and democracy. And so I've spent 20 years looking at how do you build strong democracies with a strong rule of law? And that's led me first to travel the world and do lots of interviews with people. So a lot of my book writing and so on is based on interviews with folks from Albania to Nigeria, all over the world, trying to look at how do you build stronger democracies that have less violence and more rule of law.

But my polarization work is also very data-driven. So there are comparative researchers who ask people how they feel. "Do you feel warmly or coldly about another party?" There are experimental researchers who do tests. "If we play this video correcting misperceptions about the other party, do you feel more warmly? Do you feel more coldly?" There's reams of study into how parties pick their candidates and showing that parties have been picking candidates much more extreme than their voters for 20-some years, and speculating about why. So I do a lot of reading, I do a lot of talking to people.

**Bill Haslam:** Do you see the polarization being different national versus state versus local? I mean, again, I have a sense there, but what does the data tell you?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** So we don't really have a good way to break it down because people's minds don't exist in only one place. You can tell with politicians that they tend to be most polarized when they're in legislative bodies rather than in executive bodies. I speak to two governors. If you have to make sure that your state functions, if you have to make sure your city functions, there's only so polarized you can be. Whereas when you're sitting in a legislature, whether it's state, city, or national, you can play to the fences a little bit. And so we do see that within politicians, but we don't have a lot of data about people because they tend to conflate politicians. People don't spend a lot of time on politics. Most people, it's a pretty minor part of their lives or they believe it's a minor part of their lives.

**Phil Bredesen:** It's a terrible thing to hear, a terrible thing.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Sorry. Sorry. I will say at the local level there's, I think, the most hope. When you look at how people feel about their politics in terms of can they have agency, can they get things done, local politics is really where it's at, and that agency matters. In my view, and I don't have data to back this, it's just a feel you get after you read so many studies, and so on, I think a lot of the polarization is that people feel so little control over their lives now. They can't fix their own cars anymore. They don't understand a lot of the computers and things that we all need to use. It's not like you can just change this fuse and get it fixed. And that lack of a sense of agency and control leads you to want more control over other things. And that polarization grows, I think, out of some of that feeling of you just want to know something and control something.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Yeah, I think both of us have discovered that people evaluate those executive positions differently as well. I mean, there are plenty of states which have popular Republican governors but are otherwise completely blue. So Massachusetts, for example.

**Bill Haslam:** Yeah, I always say that, well, Bernie Sanders has a Republican governor. There's the example.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Yeah. And Massachusetts just had a very popular Republican governor, and so on, so I think that underlines that. You've done all this international work, this kind of effect of the emotional polarization that you've talked about, is that happening in other places as well? Is it a theme across developed nations?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** No, it's different in different countries. So you see it going up a little in some countries, down a little in others. America is pretty sui generis in that in America it's going up the fastest of any developed democracy, any country we think of as a similar country, ours is rising the fastest. Where you see it going up, we're not alone in it going up, but where you see it going up is where politicians are playing it up. We call these politicians conflict entrepreneurs. Basically they make their base by polarizing. So you polarize and then you say the us is I'm representing you.

And populists are really good at this in particular. And so you see it with Bolsonaro in Brazil or Modi in India, but you also see it with Orban in Hungary or Erdogan in Turkey. They polarize the nation. They say, "I'm going to represent just one part of it, the us." They build this really intense and loyal base, and they use the polarization to keep their base really intense. So it's those kind of politicians, and it's not predictive based on a kind of democracy. It really, leaders matter.

**Bill Haslam:** Rachel, good point you make, but I would argue that it's probably not a coincidence that these more autocratic, like I said, rhetoric strong leaders so many have emerged around the world at the same time. Like I said, while we might be leading the pack, we're definitely not standing out from the pack. And that's true, whether it be in France and India. I mean, go around the world. I get your point, but isn't there something bigger going on that's a result of modernization, industrial, whatever it would be?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Yes and no. I mean, first of all, we do stand out in the pack. These other nations, France does not have affective polarization like we do.

**Bill Haslam:** But Le Pen almost won. I mean, so it's not—

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** That's right. That's right, because of their system, they do have a lot of people voting for a pretty extreme party. But if you ask them about kind of hatred, personal deep dislike, it's just not at the same level in the numbers.

Now, it's hard to measure across countries because some people are just more willing to express dislike than other countries. Some people as a country are more polite, but the French

are not known for that. So I trust them that their numbers are just different from ours. They are more polarized than other democracies, but America just really stands out. The other countries are at a different level.

That said, what we're seeing is the rise of a leadership style. Now, that leadership style does get hypercharged by certain things. So economic crashes, you tend to see a lot of populists like this rise in the '30s because of the crash of the economy and the Great Depression, and after 2008. But we also saw it start before 2008. Actually it goes back to 2000. These leaders, you can see them in high immigration states, but you can also see them in low immigration states like Hungary using immigration as an issue. There's almost no immigrants in Hungary. Nobody wants to go there. They want to go to Germany.

So it really has a lot to do with leadership, but I think these leaders are learning from each other. They're watching each other and learning. Anne Applebaum has a great book called *Autocracy, Inc.* where she talks about this learning and working together. So you're right that it's happening in a lot of places. America's very unusual for a strong democracy to be this bad, and it's probably happening in a lot of places more because these leaders are following one another.

**Phil Bredesen:** In a thought experiment, we've both been governors. Suppose one of us were governor here in Tennessee today. We see this going on. It certainly is going on very strongly in Tennessee. And so we decided to call you up and say, "Look, this is happening. What can I do as governor? What kind of a leadership can I exercise to try to mute this and move it back to a more traditional approach to politics?"

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Actually, I had the honor of speaking to the National Governors Association about a year ago where I gave exactly that talk to the governors.

**Phil Bredesen:** I'm afraid I wasn't there. That was—

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** That's okay. Governor Cox of Utah, a Republican from Utah was running a campaign during his year running the National Governors Association called *Disagree Better*. And he wanted to know what the research was saying about what could they do. And the fact is governors can do a lot. First of all, modeling politeness, modeling civil disagreement is one of the ways that's proven in lots of lab tests to bring down affective polarization. So the governors have been taping these videos in which they say, "I don't agree with my opponent, but we both agree that we'll follow the results of the election, and we both agree that the other is a decent human being. We just really disagree on policy." That kind of video actually makes a big dent in what people believe is proper in politics, what the norms are.

Governors can also set the norms for their parties. Governors have a lot of power in their states, in their parties to say, "These are the kind of candidates we want to get behind and we're going to endorse, and these are the kind of candidates we're not going to endorse." And voters pick up on that. Voters follow leaders. So the affective polarization that we're seeing in our country follows the ideological polarization of our leadership by 10, 20 years. It's not the leading

indicator.

**Bill Haslam:** So let me follow up on that, and earlier you said you're not certain the population is more polarized, but the people we elect are more polarized and polarizing.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Ideologically, the people we elect are—

**Bill Haslam:** I'm sorry, right, ideologically. Okay, thank you. That would lead one to believe that there's a big group of people that aren't nearly as polarized and as venomous toward the other side as the people who are getting elected. And yet I've looked at polls, those voters are hard to find who are saying, "No, I don't want somebody who's going to consider the other side as the ultimate enemy." Do you think that there's a population base there for people who are running for office to go after that just has somehow disappeared in the research recently?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** So America's 333 million people, we've got a lot of adult voters and a lot of adult non-voters as well. And it's hard to make huge generalizations about these big groups, but let me do my best here. There's a large group of people, way over 50%, I can't remember the exact number, maybe 68, something like that, that More in Common, which is a group that does polling and looking at polarization across European and American countries, it calls them the exhausted majority.

And these are people who are really moving away from politics because they hate the vitriol, they hate the negativity. They hold a mix of views. Their views are not necessarily moderate views. They might have very strong views about guns or abortion or what have you, but they want a more moderate politics. They want people to treat the other side as less of an enemy and more of a loyal opposition, and they don't like the kind of tenor of the politics, even if ideologically they might have strong views or they might not, so there's a lot of voters who would like that. I think you're seeing that now in some of the kind of hope and joy feeling that we're getting from at least one part of the constituency now.

That set of voters who might have very divergent views is often conflated with another set of voters. These are voters who often answer different things on a poll. So if you ask them about a bunch of policies that are seen as left and a bunch of policies that are seen as right, it looks like they're picking off an appetizer platter. They're like, "I'm over here on one, I'm over there on the other. I'm all over the place." And a lot of pollsters call those people moderates.

But when you look more closely, what they really are are highly disaffected. They often don't vote, first of all. If they vote, they tend to be swing voters who are voting for both sides, but not because they're sitting there and considering carefully the policies. But because what they often want is more government giveaways for their group and less for other groups, and so that puts them on the left economically and on the right more socially, and they don't tend to have a voice in most of our political conversation. And they tend to also to be the least attached to democracy.



So if you ask them about really basic democracy things like, should Congress have oversight of the president or should we have a free press, or even really basic, should the military run our country, you'll get a lot of people who are making anti-democratic answers who fall into that category. Those two things are just very different. This exhausted majority who wants the tenor taken down and this kind of group of swing voters who aren't very attached to democracy, but they get conflated.

**Phil Bredezen:** We've talked about polarization as if it were one thing, but this affective polarization with some ideologies, but surely something like that has to be more dimensional than that. I mean, are there different ways in which people are polarized?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** So it's real hard to measure a lot of different ways. We basically have these two measures, affective and ideological. Do your beliefs differ or do you hate, do you have an emotional polarization? There's also looking at do you support political violence? For instance, I do a lot of work on rule of law and political violence. Those people are actually totally different again. They might not be very partisan at all. They often don't vote. So you might think of that as connected to polarization, but it's a little bit different.

**Bill Haslam:** So let's move toward what do we do about it? I know you've written some articles about kind of a way out of where we are now. Help lead us to a better place.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Absolutely. So there's a lot we can do about it. I think the most important thing is to change the incentives of our system. As I said, people are polarized in lots of different countries, but some systems amplify and some systems depress. So I come from Alaska. The voting changes that they've made in Alaska, the ranked choice voting and instant runoff, have done real good in letting different flavors of Democrat and Republican run against each other. So you get the benefit of having political parties, and I really believe in political parties, they're really important in a democratic system.

But if you're a moderate Republican or you're a MAGA Republican, you can have both options when you don't have a primary. And if you're a progressive Democrat or you're a centrist Democrat, you get to choose from that panopoly. And the nice thing about that system is that it's really been proven with lots of different tests to reduce the incentives for politicians to polarize because you gain as a politician if you're ranked number two by a voter. So people often run and say, "Hey, I know you're going to vote for the other person, but make me your number two." So that's really important, and we can do that in a lot of states through referendums and so on.

Another important thing would be for the media to stop giving so much airtime to conflict entrepreneurs. There's a great study out of Dartmouth's Polarization Lab showing that most of the most polarizing vehement rhetoric comes from a very small percentage of members of Congress, particularly, and then they get really outsized media attention. And they don't deserve it. I mean, it's a fine thing to be a member of Congress, but you're one of a couple hundred votes. It's not that important if you're not a senior, if you don't run a committee and things like that for most people in America to know what you think. It's a district issue for most of your

district to know what you think.

So why give so much coverage to a Marjorie Taylor Greene type person? That's the way that they get to be polarizing. And that's how other people realize that that's how they can make small dollar donations. So the media could just say, is this newsworthy? Really? Is it only newsworthy in the district? And make that decision differently than they're making now.

And then there's lots of things regular people can do and lots of things businesses can do. Regular people can correct their own side. No one much cares what you think about the other side, frankly. But if your own side is being polarizing, you can say, is that really fair? They might just believe something different.

And businesses, I do a lot of work with the businesses, and one of the best things that's tested well for bringing down polarization is a Heineken beer ad, actually. It's one they ran mostly overseas, but it just shows – they have different versions of it – it shows two people who are generally seen to be very different, non-opposing sides who have to do something together, build something together, act in some way where they need to be constructive together and talking as they do that. And in two minutes, they show a civil interaction between two very different people and then they show them, because it's a beer ad, sitting down and having a beer together. And not only is it probably an effective beer ad, but it's actually one of the most effective interventions for reducing polarization.

**Phil Bredesen:** You talked about ranked choice voting, and I've been sort of intrigued by that as a possible actual strategy rather than just talking about it. You're doing it in Alaska. Is obviously being tried in some other places. Maine I think has adopted it. Do you think it works to accomplish that? What's the sense about its acceptability to people?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Acceptability is hard to gauge because most people don't really know what it means. It's still a pretty wonky thing. And when you ask people, they're just pretty confused. Places where it's been implemented, people tend to like it.

Now, there is a recall effort right now in Alaska, and that's because the people who don't like it are politicians who got elected under the last system for good reason. They know how to work one system. This is a pretty new system. It's very different and the rules are different. So if you're learning how to play tennis and suddenly you're playing pickleball, that's not much fun for the great tennis players among us. And so sitting politicians really tend not to like it. Regular voters tend to like it once they get it. Same as absentee voting. They often are against it until they get it and then they think, "Oh, this is pretty actually convenient for me." So it's one of those changes that can be hard to push because you need it to happen before people see the benefit.

**Phil Bredesen:** Do you think it has a substantial enough benefit to be worth the effort for somebody like Bill and myself to try to push it forward, or is it just one tool?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Well, not to be a both ander here, but there is no silver bullet. America has some pretty deep cultural polarization that started really back in the '60s, and we're still fighting some of those culture wars. So one change is not going to change everything, but changing incentives does matter. And so it's a particularly important change. We also need other things, but I do think it's a very valuable one. I think it needs to happen pretty quickly for it to be worthwhile to be honest, because once you polarize too far, then even ranked choice voting doesn't help. What you get is really extreme parties winning with ranked choice voting. So we need it to happen quickly.

And different states are going to be different in how Nebraska has much more of a nonpartisan system. I don't know if they need it in the same way that certain other places do. So it's not a cure-all, but you do get some different kinds of politicians, and those politicians have more room to express themselves. Susan Collins, Lisa Murkowski, the kinds of politicians who are coming out of these systems are just different.

**Bill Haslam:** Let me just throw you the biggest softball of all times. Any other advice, not just for us, but for the country as we look for a way out of where we are now?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Well, first of all, I think people do need to reclaim their agency, that we're not at the mercy of these huge forces against us. It's our country. We've gone through a lot of bad times before. This is not our first rodeo of polarization. I did mention the Civil War, but the outcomes can be pretty darn negative. What we've seen in other countries is that when we allow polarization to get really serious, people start giving their own side a pass on democratic norms. They say, "I'm so afraid of the other side that it's okay if my side breaks a few rules because we have to keep that side out." And that's really dangerous.

So it matters, and there are things we can do. There are things we can do interpersonally in terms of just building relationships with people on the other side so that it seems less— so the fear goes down. We can elect a different kind of politician. We can give money to different kinds of politicians, and we can work for some of these incentive changes of this sort.

**Phil Bredezen:** One of the things that both Bill and I have talked about and seems to be related to this, and so I'm curious about your view, is the sort of almost total collapse of local news so that people who were in the political world just tend to— it's no longer a moderating force. So people who are playing in politics play much more to social media and the national issues and so on. Do you see that as part of the issue?

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** I absolutely see it. The data upholds it very well where you have local news, you get split ticket voting much more often. So people are saying, "Oh, I like this Democrat, but I like that Republican." That's really healthy. That is a moderate voter. That's someone who's looking at the different individuals. Where you don't have local news, that's much less common because people don't know. There's not national news reporting on your city council race or your state senator. Local news reduces corruption. It does all sorts of very valuable things when there's a light shining on your leaders, and it makes people feel like they're part of a community.

It advertises the Kiwanis Club pancakes on the plaza July 4th event or what have you, and that matters. To feel like you're part of one community helps people feel that there's something above politics, that politics is not your religion. It's not your whole identity. It's one part of an identity that also includes a lot of other things we share in common.

**Phil Bredeesen:** Yeah, I've been struck by some of the local news that seems to be successful, and particularly in smaller towns. The stuff that's in the newspaper is, I mean, the police blotter. I grew up in a small town. I was looking at the newspaper from back in the 1960s when I lived there and it's got on the front page of the paper is my mother entertained her son who was back from college for three days and for three or four lines. And people have just, I think, a very different sense of community when that kind of thing exists. And I don't know how to resurrect them, but since the business model has changed, but it certainly seems to be a sea change in the way we think about things.

**Bill Haslam:** This podcast takes its name from Senator Howard Baker who had a quote about always remember the other person might be right. Can you think of an example of a time when you can look and say, I didn't quite get that right? Now that I think about it, the other side had this right, and I'm not certain that I did.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** My husband would say all the time, because I have a tendency to state my opinions very strongly within the family and then be wrong more often than not, I would say. So, yeah, that happens a lot to me. On a more policy-related issue, it also happens quite a lot. I mean, if I want to take one right now, I think that Israel and Gaza, I probably got wrong at the beginning, and it's a hard one. I think that Israel has a right to exist and a right to protect its citizens and that a country is not a terrorist group. There is no nothing similar about those. And so at the beginning I was really, really down on, especially before the war started, the vitriol against Israel and the lack of respect for its right to act.

But as the war's gone on, its method of conducting this war has been so scorched earth and so unhelpful to Israel itself that I've changed my mind about the value of what it's trying to do and how it's trying to make change. But here's where polarization really comes in, right? Because there's so little room to say, the state of Israel has right to protect itself and the Palestinian population has a right to live and we also don't want a war in the Middle East and Hamas is a bloodthirsty terrorist group. I mean, to hold all those views at the same time, there's not a lot of space in our political life, and polarization, basically, it makes things less nuanced. What you really want in our world is a more complicated picture. You want people to be able to hold a lot of views that are mixed, and we don't get that when you have polarization, you have to pick one side or the other. And that's unfortunate for our politics.

**Phil Bredeesen:** We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us, and it's really interesting to hear about this from someone who's actually doing research and doing the reading and doing the looking at the scientific results that have come in. I think that piece of it is often missing in the discussions. And we thank you.

**Bill Haslam:** Agree. And I think one of the things, both of us have been mayors and both have been governors, and I think we would agree with your emphasis on the better hope for change coming out of local, number one. And number two, your point about the complexity of answers. My big takeaway from being in office for 15 years was most answers are a lot more complicated, and the other side has a little better argument than I thought they did before I got into the discussion.

So thank you. We're grateful for your time. I really appreciate your insight. Thanks for joining us.

**Rachel Kleinfeld:** Thank you very much.

**Bill Haslam:** Well, Phil, what do you think?

**Phil Bredeesen:** It's interesting. It's good to talk to somebody who's kind of a little more scientific grounded in some of the data. I wasn't encouraged. I mean, I think she didn't do anything to make me think that a polarization was not as strong as we think it is or that it's going away. But I think the beginning of being able to deal with it is just to understand what actually is going on under the hood.

**Bill Haslam:** I think you're right. To me, where she started was, as you would say, this notion that our elected officials are more polarized than the population, that the population agrees on more. But I've always felt like we get the elected leaders that we deserve. And so we, at the end of the day, elect the people that are reflecting how we feel about something. So I hope she's right. I haven't ever seen that data that says there's a big group of people that says, "I'm tired of this fighting, and I believe it strongly enough, I'm going to support somebody who's working for the best results, even if I don't agree with them on every issue."

**Phil Bredeesen:** And the thing that I keep coming back to is you have this polarization, but there's also so many other axes of interaction with people that are much healthier. I mean, as you know, I'm from a small town originally in upstate New York, and it was very conservative. I mean, the county I'm in voted for Trump by 20 points I think it was, and so on. And I have big extended family up there, so a lot of my relatives are MAGA Republicans, but I know them as loving parents and sensible people and so on. And I think just finding some way, whether it be through local news or other ways to make people understand that these people are not the devil incarnate, but they're your neighbors and the people you see in the grocery store and have many of the same desires that you do is really important. And how we enhance that, I think is one of the big questions.

**Bill Haslam:** Well said. Thanks. Enjoyed it.

**Marianne Wanamaker:** Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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